

# ULYSSEANA

PUBLIC FIGURES AND THE HUMANITIES



## MACHIAVELLI, FOR EXAMPLE

BY

ERMANNNO BENCIVENGA

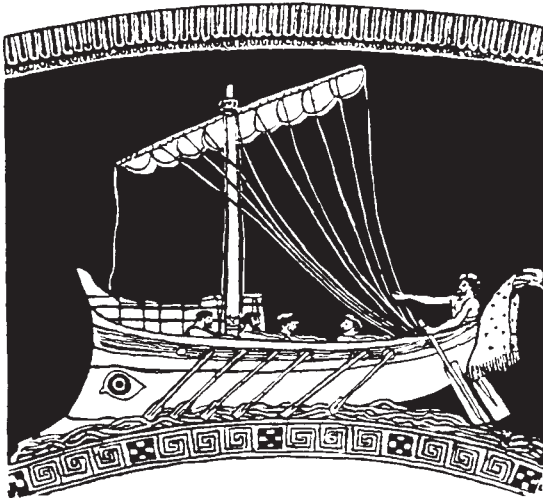
THE FAMILY OF BENJAMIN Z. GOULD  
CENTER FOR HUMANISTIC STUDIES

CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE



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The continuing *Ulysseana* series, like its eponymous hero, has undergone many transformations. The most significant was instituted by Jay Martin, Interim Director of the Gould Center from 1998–99, who reconfigured the series to include works by distinguished scholars, scientists, public figures, social critics, and commentators in every field of investigation. Like Ulysses, the forthcoming essays in this series shall bear the stamp of adventure and intellectual daring, and fuse, according to the mission of the Gould Center, private vision, public affairs, and the historical tradition of humanistic thinking.

Ricardo J. Quinones  
*Director*  
*Gould Center for Humanistic Studies*

ERMANNNO BENCIVENGA, a remarkably versatile scholar and teacher and prolific writer, has written numerous books and articles covering many periods and aspects of thought. In both his native Italian and in English, he uses his pellucid prose style to explicate—for the lay public as well as his university colleagues and students—such diverse subjects as logic, semantics, metaphysics, subjectivity and reason, dialectical method, and the history of philosophy. Bencivenga has averred, “I like good writing, which includes, but is not reducible to, clear writing: it also includes respect and appreciation, indeed affection, for the texture and resonances of words.” He has demonstrated this conviction with such titles as *Kant’s Copernican Revolution*; *The Discipline of Subjectivity: An Essay on Montaigne*; *La libertà: un dialogo* (“Freedom: A Dialogue”); *Oltre la tolleranza* (“Beyond Tolerance”), *A Theory of Language and Mind*; and *Panni sporchi* (“Dirty Laundry”), a collection of poetry.

Ermanno Bencivenga currently teaches philosophy at the University of California at Irvine. “Machiavelli, for Example,” the essay reprinted here, was first delivered at Claremont McKenna College on November 8, 1999 as part of the Questions of Civilization speakers series.

# MACHIAVELLI, FOR EXAMPLE

*Ermanno Bencivenga*

A common complaint about Machiavelli as a political scientist is that he proceeds too much by the use of examples and not enough by way of argument. Commentators sympathetic to Machiavelli most often accept the substance of this criticism, and then the best they can do is appeal to some rhetorical purpose his language is trying to serve. Thus, in George Bull's introduction to his translation of *The Prince*, we read that "*The Prince* is a classic because of its shrewd psychological insight, its prophetic quality, and its hard, vehement prose, and because it has never lost the power to shock. The artist in Machiavelli, as much as the analyst, is often responsible for the shocks. He loved antithesis and generalization; he was intuitive rather than logical; he constantly dramatized his remarks and exaggerated his conclusions for the sake of impact" (xix). In Maurizio Viroli's recent *Machiavelli*, we are told that "Machiavelli's examples . . . are ornaments, in the technical sense, rhetorical devices that serve the orator to attain his goal—that is, to persuade" (81). And, sometimes, such accounts are simply confused, as in Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov's introduction to their translation of *The Discourses*: "[Machiavelli's] constant use of examples does not signify an unphilosophical inability to formulate universal propositions or to think systematically. . . . In fact, he provides many universals but qualifies or contradicts them, partly with other universals and especially with examples. His universals must always be read and revised in light of his examples. He too has a system, but the system includes his examples. To make philosophy pay more regard to things as they are, he wants to teach it to speak through examples, just as

political rulers govern through examples and not only through laws” (xli). There you have it: the man can do philosophy—that is, speak in general terms—though he also likes to contradict himself, and his system is supposed to be inclusive of such contradictions. With friends like that, as the saying goes, why would the Florentine thinker need enemies?

In this paper, I will propose a new reading of Machiavelli’s examples and of their *essential* role in his general political project—a project and a role from which philosophers have a lot to learn. I will argue that Machiavelli can only be a political scientist insofar as he is an artist—and that other political scientists would be well advised to follow his *example*. To develop my reading, I will have to expose a substantial portion of Machiavelli’s framework; but all that might seem unrelated at first should make sense in the end.

According to Machiavelli, human affairs are chaotic—in the sense made precise by contemporary chaos theory. “[I]n everything some evil is concealed that makes new accidents emerge, . . . [and makes it] necessary to provide for this with new orders” (D244).<sup>1</sup> The reason why the evil is initially concealed is twofold. First, its beginnings are small: it is hard to anticipate the devastating consequences of a butterfly effect when all you see is a butterfly flapping its wings. Thus, “[a]s the Roman republic was growing in reputation, strength, and empire, its neighbors, who at first had not thought of how much harm that new republic could bring them, began—but late—to recognize their error” (D71). And, second, such developments are often new, and people tend to go by habit, to faithfully repeat what has worked in the past: “[w]hen any malignity remains hidden for a time, this proceeds from a hidden cause, which is not recognized because no contrary experience has been seen. But time, which they say is the father of every truth, exposes it later” (D15). So, in conclusion, “[i]t is so much the more difficult

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* (D) come from the edition translated, and with an introduction by, H. Mansfield and N. Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). References to *The Prince* (P) are from the edition translated, and with an introduction by, G. Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1961).

to recognize . . . inconveniences when they arise as it appears more natural to men always to favor the beginnings of things” (D72). “As the doctors say of a wasting disease, to start with it is easy to cure but difficult to diagnose; after a time, unless it has been diagnosed and treated at the outset, it becomes easy to diagnose but difficult to cure. So it is in politics” (P10). Which accounts for why “all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, . . . [but] must either rise or fall” (D23). And it exposes the delusion of believing that one can play it safe: “no government should ever imagine that it can always adopt a safe course; rather, it should regard all possible courses of action as risky. This is the way things are: whenever one tries to escape one danger one runs into another” (P72).

One main cause of such twists and turns is external: contact with foreign peoples inevitably brings about a weakening of local traditions. Thus, at D110–11, Machiavelli praises the Germans: “In the province of Germany . . . goodness and . . . religion are still seen to be great . . . , which makes many republics there live free, and they observe their laws so that no one from outside or inside dares to seize them. . . . When it occurs to those republics that they need to spend some quantity of money for the public account, they are used to having those magistrates or councils that have authority for it assess on all the inhabitants of the city one percent or two of what each has of value. When such a decision has been made, each presents himself before the collectors of such a duty according to the order of the town; and having first taken an oath to pay the fitting amount, he throws into a chest so designated what according to his conscience it appears to him he ought to pay. Of this payment there is no witness except him who pays. Hence it can be conjectured how much goodness and how much religion are yet in those men.” And that is largely because of their “not having had great intercourse with neighbors, for neither have the latter gone to their home nor have they gone to someone else’s home. . . . Hence the cause of every intercourse and the beginning of every corruption has been taken away.” Which is no less true when

the “intercourse” in question is the outcome of military conquest: “acquisitions sometimes do no middling harm to every well-ordered republic, when it acquires a city or a province full of delights, whereby it can take their customs through the intercourse it has with them. . . . And truly, similar cities or provinces avenge themselves against their conqueror without fighting and without blood, for by permeating it with their bad customs they expose it to being conquered by whoever assaults it” (D174–75).

But, even if no such contact with the outside is made, there are internal causes for disorder. This point, too, is relevant to the Germans: a second main reason for their political stability is that they “do not endure that any citizen of theirs either be or live in the usage of a gentleman; indeed, they maintain among themselves an even equality, and to the lords and gentlemen who are in that province they are very hostile. If by chance some fall into their hands, they kill them as the beginnings of corruption and the cause of every scandal” (D111). It is important to work out in detail the significance of this instructive and, in the end, ambivalent recipe.

“[M]en hate things either from fear or from envy,” says Machiavelli at D123, so they hate powerful people because they are afraid of them and rich people because they want their riches for themselves: “the nature of men is ambitious and suspicious and does not know how to set a limit to any fortune it may have” (D65). And what is true of individual people is also true of states in their mutual relationships: “war is made on a republic for two causes: one, to become master of it; the other, for fear lest it seize you” (D22). As these passages make clear, Machiavelli tends to run together envy and greed (and, for that matter, ambition as well), and, though these are, strictly speaking, distinct motivations (my envy would be satisfied, but my greed would not, if a person richer than myself were to become poor *while I become no richer*), I will not distinguish them here.

Greed and fear have a solid ground in human nature: “The cause is that nature has created men so that they are able to desire everything and are unable to attain everything. So, since the desire is always greater than the power of acquiring, the result is discontent with what one possesses and a lack of satisfaction with it” (D78). Similarly, “human appetites are insatiable, for since from nature they have the ability and the wish to desire all things and from fortune the ability to achieve few of them, there continually results from this a discontent in human minds and a disgust with the things they possess” (D125).

On the basis of this diagnosis, it follows that there will be more stability, the fewer occasions people have for the arising of fear or greed. So, at the very least, there is value in equality: “he constitutes a republic where a great equality exists or has been made . . . ; otherwise he will produce a thing without proportion and hardly lasting” (D113). And, more specifically, it is advisable (a) to keep the citizens in a state of poverty, and (b) to put drastic limitations on any power they are assigned: “well-ordered republics have to keep the public rich and their citizens poor” (D79); “the most useful thing that may be ordered in a free way of life is that the citizens be kept poor” (D271); “[o]ne could show with a long speech how much better fruits poverty produced than riches, and how the one has honored cities, provinces, sects, and the other has ruined them, if this matter had not been celebrated many times by other men” (D272); “[i]f a free authority is given for a long time—calling a long time one year or more—it will always be dangerous” (D76); “when the people orders magistrates, it should make them so that they have to have some hesitation about becoming criminals. . . . [The people] ought to post a guard for itself over [the magistrates] to keep them good” (D89). The point of poverty is straightforward: if people are poor, there will be little cause for greed among them. The point of the limitations on power is more complex: unrestrained power generates greed in those who have it, resentment in the others, and suspicion in the former because of the latter’s resentment. Nor does it matter

if the people granted this unrestrained power are good to begin with, “for an absolute authority corrupts the matter in a very short time” (D77).

So that is why the Germans did well in maintaining equality, to the point of killing those who tried to distinguish themselves from the crowd. And yet, this is ultimately not the best course of action, Machiavelli claims. As we seem ready for an interpretation of his thought that favors a stable state, a correction is required, and the value of directly pursuing stability is denied.

To begin with, note that the Romans did not proceed like the Germans; they allowed a lot of foreigners to take residence and even citizenship in Rome, and as a consequence faced their share of problems, which they had to address with tactical solutions. “Because of the liberality that the Romans practiced in giving citizenship to foreigners, so many new men were born in Rome that they began to have so much share in the votes that the government began to vary, and it departed from the things and from the men with which it was accustomed to go. When Quintus Fabius . . . perceived this, he put all these new men from whom this disorder derived under four tribes, so that by being shut in such small spaces they could not corrupt all Rome” (D309–10; there is nothing new about the political strategy of redesigning electoral districts in order to favor a given party, it seems). Also, Rome allowed for social differences, and consequently experienced social unrest. The nobles and the people were constantly struggling with each other, in ways that were often quite wild: “the people together crying out against the Senate, the Senate against the people, running tumultuously through the streets, closing shops, the whole plebs leaving Rome” (D16–17). And indeed, “[if great] accidents ever arose in any city, they arose in Rome, ones both strange and unhoped for, as when it appeared that all the Roman women had conspired against their husbands to kill them. . . . So also was the conspiracy of the Bacchanals . . . , in which many thousands of men and women were actually involved” (D308–9). But Machiavelli, far from finding these occurrences

a basis for criticism, seems to think of them as a manifestation, and even a source, of Rome's *strength*: "those who damn the tumults between the nobles and the plebs blame those things that were the first cause of keeping Rome free, and . . . : they consider the noises and the cries that would arise in such tumults more than the good effects that they engendered" (D16). Which requires that we reevaluate the "corruption" brought about by both foreigners and social differences.

At D20–23, Machiavelli compares Rome with two other powerful cities: Sparta and Venice. Both the latter are cited as examples of "republics that have been free for a long while without such enmities and tumults [as were to be found in Rome]." Sparta achieved its great stability (much like the German republics mentioned earlier) by "block[ing] the way to those who might come to inhabit it." Venice made all the original inhabitants into rulers, and "those who came later to inhabit . . . [it] were not many, nor of such number that there was a disproportion between whoever governed them and those who were governed: for the number of gentlemen [i.e., of rulers] is either equal or superior to them." In both cases, then, stability was achieved by staying small; but, when those cities ventured out to conquer foreign territories, they found that, though they were initially successful, they could not hold on to their conquests. Their citizens were simply not numerous enough to cope with that task. Machiavelli's conclusion from this comparison is a general one: "if you wish to make a people numerous and armed so as to be able to make a great empire, you make it of such a quality that you cannot yet manage it in your mode; if you maintain it either small or unarmed so as to be able to manage it, then if you acquire dominion you cannot hold it or it becomes so cowardly that you are the prey of whoever assaults you." Or, as he puts it elsewhere, "[t]hose who plan for a city to make a great empire should contrive with all industry to make it full of inhabitants, for without this abundance of men one will never succeed in making a city great" (D133).

At D8, essentially the same point is made from a different angle. "Because men work either by necessity

or by choice, and because there is greater virtue to be seen where choice has less authority, it should be considered whether it is better to choose sterile places for the building of cities so that men, constrained to be industrious and less seized by idleness, live more united, having less cause for discord, because of the poverty of the site. . . . This choice would without doubt be wiser and more useful if men were content to live off their own and did not wish to seek to command others." Since the latter is not likely to be the case, "it is necessary to avoid this sterility in a country and to settle in the most fertile places, where, since [the city] can expand because of the abundance of the site, it can both defend itself from whoever might assault it and crush anyone who might oppose its greatness. As to the idleness that the site might bring, the laws should be ordered to constrain it by imposing such necessities as the site does not provide."

But, one might ask, why go through this elaborate strategy of selecting a riskier site and then balancing its dangers with appropriate legislation, when one could simply check greed from the beginning and not "seek to command others"? The Spartans and the Venetians were not well advised to venture into imperialistic politics: but what if they had not, and had stayed within the confines of their small powers? And what about those admirable German cities, which apparently followed just this course? In other words, even agreeing with Machiavelli that there is a basic imbalance between human desire and human achievement, and hence that greed is a necessary component of human nature, why shouldn't he encourage restraining it, instead of proposing that we go along with it and then address the many problems it creates?

What is wrong with this suggestion is that avoiding confrontation with others is extremely complicated, to the point of being virtually impossible, *even if* one is not oneself especially aggressive. Going back to the examples of Sparta and Venice (D22–23), Machiavelli notes that a state with no imperialistic tendency would still have to have "such power that nobody would believe he could crush it at once," and yet it

could not be “so great as to be formidable to its neighbors.” Nor, whatever its power and whether or not it is ambitious, should it be perceived to be ambitious, for otherwise it might “occur that one will make war for fear of it.” Machiavelli has no doubt that, “if the thing could be held balanced in this mode, it would be the true political way of life and the true quiet of a city.” But delicate balances cannot be kept: “one cannot, as I believe, balance this thing, nor maintain this middle way exactly.” And, if war is inevitable, delaying it only means making it worse: “there is no avoiding war; it can only be postponed to the advantage of others” (P10); “one must never allow disorder to continue so as to escape a war. Anyhow one does not escape: the war is merely postponed to one’s disadvantage” (P12); “if you let . . . (something) go through fear, you do it to avoid war, and most often you do not avoid it. For he to whom you will have conceded this and uncovered your cowardice will not stand still but will wish to take other things away from you and will get more inflamed against you since he esteems you less” (D157).

The notion of *arete* (the Greek word usually translated as “virtue”) is central to Aristotle’s ethics; and *arete* is defined by Aristotle as the middle state between two extremes—a vice of excess and one of deficiency. This state represents a delicate balance and is achieved after a long process of habituation; when it is, the individual whose soul is in that state will remain forever consistent with him/herself, and as stable as humans can be through their varying and confusing circumstances. The notion of *virtú* (an Italian word also often translated as “virtue”) is central to Machiavelli’s politics and “ethics” (if that is the right name for it). Machiavellian virtue also enables an individual to maintain a steady course within the turmoil of human affairs: but there are fundamental differences (indeed, elements of conflict) between the ways in which this steadiness is achieved for Aristotle and Machiavelli. One of them has emerged here: Machiavelli is no admirer of middle courses and delicate balances. They are largely unfeasible and typically end up doing more evil

than good. A related one is: he puts no value on self-consistency. The successful way of dealing with ever-changing circumstances is by flexibly adapting to them. “It can . . . be observed that with two circumspect men, one will achieve his end, the other not; and likewise two men succeed equally well with different methods, one of them being circumspect and the other impetuous. This results from nothing else except the extent to which their methods are or are not suited to the nature of the times. Thus it happens that, as I have said, two men, working in different ways, can achieve the same end, and of two men working in the same way one gets what he wants and the other does not. . . . Nor do we find any man shrewd enough to know how to adapt his policy in this way; either because he cannot do otherwise than what is in character or because, having always prospered by proceeding one way, he cannot persuade himself to change” (P79).

The paradoxical-sounding outcome of this line of thought is that what stability is accessible to us can only be obtained by a course of action that puts no value on it. Assuming a state to be strong and healthy, putting a value on stability would mean trying to keep it as much as possible the way it is—not allowing for immigration, not encouraging social dynamism, not changing laws or institutions. But this policy could never have the effect of strengthening the state, and because, again, “all things of men . . . cannot stay steady, . . . [but] must either rise or fall” (D23), it would inevitably have the effect of weakening it, to the point perhaps where a powerful neighbor might conquer it. So the policy’s final outcome would be to bring about the state’s decay. If, on the other hand, the state accepted the challenge of changing times and the risks connected with changing with them, it might become more powerful, and thus ultimately be better able to maintain its strength and health. In conclusion, as I said, those who do not value stability are more likely to attain it. Which also explains why the German cities’ recipe was instructive but ambivalent: there are probably special reasons why something so generally counter-productive worked for them (their sites might be easier

to defend than most, say; see D173); so, however happy their situation, it might be dangerous to imitate them.

But, if what is needed for successful politics is the capacity to adapt to ever varying circumstances, the objection might be raised of what the point of Machiavelli's own work is. True, he does not elaborate an abstract model on the basis of rational arguments, and then imagine that it will automatically apply to existing states. This strategy, according to him, would be vain, since often things sound credible in the abstract but prove wrong when they are given concrete application. It sounds credible, for example, that the best time to attack an army would be just after it has emerged victorious from a strong battle, but, as it turns out, "[t]his opinion has certain reasons that at a distance appear true but are altogether alien from the truth" (D180). So we can understand why Machiavelli hardly ever mentions philosophers like Plato or Aristotle. They were well known in his cultural environment, but their approach was, in his view, entirely misguided: "Many have dreamed up republics and principalities which have never in truth been known to exist; the gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done learns the way to self-destruction rather than self-preservation" (P48). And yet, is what he does substantially any better, and are his references to historians and historical events conducive to more enlightenment? How is his "continuous study of the ancient world" (P1) going to be relevant to future developments, and why should his decision "to take a path as yet untrodden by anyone" (D5)—that is, to reflect extensively on the politics of ancient Rome—prove useful at all when the times have changed so much and will keep changing, and what was effective once might be totally irrelevant now?

At P46 we are told that "[a] prince . . . must have no other object or thought, nor acquire skill in anything, except war, its organization, and its discipline." It is a stark, radical view, itself in need to be accounted for; but here let us just accept it and consider an important consequence of it. In order to become a skilled warrior,

a prince must, not surprisingly, constantly train for war: “[the prince] must never let his thoughts stray from military exercises, which he must pursue more vigorously in peace than in war” (P46). It is easy to see how someone could train for war at a time of war: he would do so by simply practicing war—much as someone trains for soccer by playing it. It is not as easy to see how he could train for war at a time of peace—indeed, how he could do so even “more vigorously . . . than in war.” Part of this goal he will attain by “keeping his men well organized and trained,” which will have the effect both of keeping them fit and ready and of having himself constantly practice the enforcement of discipline. But that is not all: “he must always be out hunting, so accustoming his body to hardships and also learning some practical geography: how the mountains slope, how the valleys open, how the plains spread out. He must study rivers and marshes: and in all this he should take great pains.” Leave aside the effect of hunting on the prince’s physical fitness: the value of that is obvious. Concentrate rather on his learning of geography; this, as it turns out, “is useful in two ways: first, if he obtains a clear understanding of local geography he will have a better understanding of how to organize his defence; and in addition his knowledge of and acquaintance with local conditions will make it easy for him to grasp the features of any new locality with which he may need to familiarize himself. For example, the hills and valleys, the plains, the rivers, and the marshes of Tuscany have certain features in common with those of other provinces; so with a knowledge of the geography of one particular province one can easily acquire knowledge of the geography of others. . . . This kind of ability teaches him how to locate the enemy, where to take up quarters, how to lead his army on the march and draw it up for battle, and lay siege to a town to the best advantage” (P46–47). Essentially the same point is made in *The Discourses*: “Among the other things that are necessary to a captain of armies is the knowledge of sites and of countries, for without this general and particular knowledge a captain of armies cannot work anything well. Because all the

sciences demand practice if one wishes to possess them perfectly, this is one that requires very great practice. This practice, or truly this particular knowledge, is acquired more through hunts than by any other training . . . once one individual has made himself very familiar with a region, he then understands with ease all new countries; for every country and every member of the latter have some conformity together, so that one passes easily from the knowledge of one to the knowledge of the other” (D297–98).

There are two kinds of war one may fight: defensive and aggressive. Defensive war is often fought on one’s own territory, hence the knowledge one acquires of that territory (say, through the practice of hunting) gives one an obvious, direct basis for superiority over a less knowledgeable enemy. The latter is, after all, most often a foreigner; so, if one makes sure that one is not equally a foreigner to one’s own country (because, say, one spends too much idle time at court among jesters and intellectuals), one will definitely have an advantage in this kind of military confrontation. Aggressive war, on the other hand, is often fought on enemy—that is, on *foreign*—territory; so it is much more interesting to see why Machiavelli thinks that hunting in Tuscany would give one an advantage when fighting in, say, Lombardy.

Begin with a view which he most definitely does *not* share, but which would be natural for someone who favors abstract reasoning. According to this view, one should acquire knowledge of some general geographical (and military/strategic) truths, and then apply such knowledge to whatever territory one finds relevant to one’s military pursuits. The knowledge could be acquired gradually, maybe by first learning the details of one’s local geography, but there is actually no reason why it should: one could get it just as effectively all at once from a book. This view sees things hierarchically, vertically as it were: general truths are on top and their instances follow from them; so, even if one got up there starting from some such instances, the latter become irrelevant once one is on top—and were unnecessary anyway. But this is, as I said, not Machiavelli’s view:

his picture is non-hierarchical, horizontal. Whatever new locality one finds oneself in, one will need to familiarize oneself with it, with the *specifics* of it (so, in the last passage from *The Prince* quoted above, he says that, after knowing the geography of a particular province, one still needs “to acquire knowledge of the geography of others”); and, though of course every locality will have some features in common with every other locality, this will create at best “family resemblances” between localities, and what course of military action is appropriate to any of them will always follow from an intimate understanding of its particularities—not from universal, abstract statements about all localities. So hunting provides not the theoretical advantage of making one access general truths but the practical advantage of training one to constantly adapt oneself to new localities, which will become immediately relevant when, at a time of war, one has to do more of the same adapting: it is not the propositional knowledge of those (alleged) truths that matters, but the know-how, the “ability” acquired by practicing a skill.

Returning once again to the same passage in *The Prince*, I need to bring out a sentence I had intentionally skipped. After saying that military exercises must be pursued more vigorously in peace than in war, Machiavelli adds: “These exercises can be both physical and mental” (P46). And a bit later he explains: “As for intellectual training, the prince must read history, studying the actions of eminent men to see how they conducted themselves during war and to discover the reasons for their victories or their defeats, so that he can avoid the latter and imitate the former” (P47).

Hunting is not fighting a war; and, when it comes to training for something, nothing matches the real thing. But there are enough resemblances between hunting and fighting a war (and we can add to them—a point I work out later) that the practice of hunting can be an effective way of training for war, if nothing better is available. Similarly, reading about wars of the past is not fighting one now; but it can be a useful substitute for it—it can teach us about situations and tricks we have not encountered yet and, if no other

preparation for such occurrences is forthcoming (as it hardly *can* be for all situations and tricks, considering how many there are), this vicarious “practice” may be quite helpful. For it actually to be helpful, however, the reading we do must not consist of vague generalities: it must, as much as possible, vividly place us in those situations and have us handle those tricks, hence it must provide as much concrete detail as will make the circumstances come alive for us and give us a credible alternative to experiencing them ourselves. Universal statements will never achieve that: examples are the very fabric of what instruction the political discourse of an intellectual can provide—of what “mental exercise” it can facilitate.

The extension of our capacities promised by theoretical, abstract accounts is enormously ambitious and claims to be perfectly secure: once we have reached the correct theoretical understanding of an issue, we can allegedly apply it across the board to all its potentially infinite instances, and a successful outcome should necessarily follow. With practical training we have much more modest, uncertain hopes. If the task before us is one that we have been able to turn into total routine, success will be most likely. But, typically, the situation we face will be, slightly or not so slightly, different from the one we trained for; so our success will depend on how good we are at extrapolating from the routine we learned to something that matches the new demands, at adjusting our specifications to the new circumstances. And that ability is also something we can train for, in the same modest and uncertain way: we can practice extrapolating from one situation to another and then, when the need arises, try to extend what we have learned about extrapolation to the new extrapolating demands we face. Machiavelli thinks that the former kind of promise, however attractive, is a delusion: nothing is gained from speaking in generalities other than how to speak in generalities. So he thinks that we are left with the latter; and, for that purpose, lively, rich, detailed historical examples are a precious resource.

A substantial portion of what practical training amounts to is imitation. We learn to march, or to play basketball or the guitar, by seeing others do it and trying to do as they do. And, again, there will have to be some adapting of the model they provide to our circumstances; still the concrete model—that specific individual, with all of his/her peculiarities—will be what concretely guides us. “Men nearly always follow the tracks made by others and proceed in their affairs by imitation, even though they cannot entirely keep to the tracks of others or emulate the prowess of their models” (P17—“prowess” is Bull’s translation of “virtú”). So we are not surprised to see the word “imitate” at the end of the last quote above from P47, and we find additional articulation (and evidence) for this general interpretive line in the sentences that follow it in *The Prince*: “Above all, . . . [the prince] must read history so that he can do what eminent men have done before him: taken as their model some historical figure who has been praised and honoured; and always kept his deeds and actions before them. In this way, it is said, Alexander the Great imitated Achilles; Caesar imitated Alexander; and Scipio, Cyrus. And anyone who reads the life of Cyrus, written by Xenophon, will then see how much of the glory won by Scipio can be attributed to his emulation of Cyrus, and how much, in his chastity, courtesy, humanity, and generosity, Scipio conformed to the picture which Xenophon drew of Cyrus” (P47–48). By following Xenophon’s example, Machiavelli will draw a powerful picture (and yes: one that is “intuitive rather than logical,” for good reason) of Cesare Borgia, and try to have the Medici pay attention to it: follow it as an example. And he will be, as Bull notes, “untroubled by the contrast between the historical Cesare and the Cesare he sets before the Medici as an ideal” (Pxix). For no one can really know—and very few care to know—what Cyrus II, king of Persia, was really like; what Scipio followed as an example was Xenophon’s Cyrus, and that is what ultimately matters, because it is what made a difference for Scipio and for all subsequent history.

At D123–24, Machiavelli acknowledges that, while “[m]en always praise ancient times,” they do so “not always reasonably,” indeed their opinion of the past is most often false. And yet, though this custom “of praising and blaming is true, . . . it is not at all always true that to do so is to err. . . . He who is born . . . [in a well-ordered city or province] and praises ancient times more than modern deceives himself. . . . But they who are born . . . when the time has come for it to descend toward the worse side, do not deceive themselves then.” To some extent, what Machiavelli says here seems uncontroversial: if one lives in very bad times, however inflated one’s view of the past might be, still it is most likely the case that the past was better than the present. But Machiavelli does not limit himself to praising the past: he describes it. And an inflated description is, after all, a *false* description; and people are likely to give false and inflated descriptions of the past for some of the reasons he mentions in this same passage—because the past is hard to understand, because historians were deferential toward the victors, because we feel no special animosity against people who have been dead for a long time. So the bottom line is: Machiavelli knows that some of what he says about ancient Rome is probably inaccurate, but he is not impressed by this contingency. Which means that “history” for him is more an arena for a practical training relevant to the present than the true record of past incidents. And this may be a good time to bring out the fact that Machiavelli’s Italian word “istoria” (just like the Latin word “historia” it derived from, and the contemporary Italian word “storia” it evolved into) can be translated as both “history” and “story.”

So Machiavelli can be confident about the value of his work. Though every locality is different from every other and no universal law applies to all of them, all localities are made of the same basic elements (mountains, rivers, woods, marshes); so, the more one gets used to seeing these elements in different combinations, the better able one will be to react successfully to a new combination of them. Similarly, though every age is different from every other, “men are born, live,

and die always in one and the same order” (D36) and have always the same basic motivations (greed, fear, admiration); so, the more one becomes familiar with different variations on this basic vocabulary, the better able one will be to handle a new variation. “Whoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there always have been. So it is an easy thing for whoever examines past things diligently to foresee future things in every republic and to take the remedies for them that were used by the ancients, or, if they do not find any that were used, to think up new ones through the similarity of accidents” (D83–84). “Prudent men are accustomed to say, and not by chance or without merit, that whoever wishes to see what has to be considers what has been; for all worldly things in every time have their own counterpart in ancient times. That arises because these are the work of men, who have and always had the same passions, and they must of necessity result in the same effect” (D302). And Machiavelli believes that such knowledge is precisely what he has to offer: “Men who are anxious to win the favour of a Prince nearly always follow the custom of presenting themselves to him with the possessions they value most, or with things they know especially please him. . . . I have not found among my belongings anything as dear to me or that I value as much as my understanding of the deeds of great men” (Pi).

For this resource to deliver all it can, we know now, the writer must provide as much of an effective substitute for the real experience as can be found on a written page. But there is more: the reader must be active, too. Consider once more physical training for war. At P47 we read the following: “Philopoemen, the leader of the Achaeans, has been praised by the historians for, among other things, having never in peacetime thought of anything else except military strategy. When he was in the country with his friends, he would often stop and invite a discussion: If the enemy were on top of that hill, and we were down here with our army, which of us would have the advantage? How

would one engage them without breaking ranks? If we wanted to retreat, how would we have to set about it? If they retreated, how would we best pursue them?"

The counterfactual practice described here—for which no better word than “play” could be found—is essential for acquiring the extrapolating ability needed to really learn from examples. We might say that it is all that that ability consists of. If, say, one goes hunting in a totally automatic way, one might miss the relevance of this experience to the distinct experience of going to war—hence the former might be of no help to the latter. Such help will be forthcoming, on the other hand, to the extent that one is constantly forcing the experience one is having (and thus adding to it, as I suggested earlier): to the extent that one is *already* trying, that is, to adapt it to different circumstances—circumstances that do not currently hold, nonexistent ones. We might also say: to the extent that one, while going hunting, *pretends* to go to war. The same is true for reading: passive, routine reading generates only useless erudition. Only when a historical *event* is perceived as an *example*, that is, as something that is relevant to the current situation, something we could imitate right now, about which we might ask, “How would X behave if he were me, or how would I if I were him?”, does such reading provide knowledge that is politically valuable.

This lesson about how to read has an obvious application to the reading of Machiavelli, which gives us a new perspective on the charges of immorality he was so often subjected to. So, though this is not all there is to say about such charges, it is useful to bring it out. When Plato says that in the ideal republic the rulers ought to lie to the people for the latter’s (and the republic’s) own good, those of us who find that kind of paternalism objectionable will have to judge Plato’s message wrong and avoid any use of it; for he is presenting us with the form of the state—the one each spatiotemporally existing state should try to approach as closely as possible. Plato’s assertion, in other words, is an implicitly universal one about what is good for every state; accepting it would automatically mean

finding it to be an accurate description of what ought to be the case in *our* situation. Similarly, when Aristotle says that some people are naturally slaves because “from the hour of their birth, . . . [they] are marked out for subjection” (*Politics* 1254a), that again is to be taken as a universal statement, uttered by someone who has wisdom, that is, “knowledge about . . . causes and principles” (*Metaphysics* 982a) which apply to all circumstances; so, again, if we find the discrimination expressed in this statement objectionable, we will have to reject what Aristotle is saying and avoid any use of it.

When, on the other hand, Machiavelli says that Cesare Borgia, after entrusting full powers in Romagna to Remirro de Orco, a cruel and efficient man, and using him to pacify and unify that province, in order to purge the minds of the people of the hatred this conduct had earned him, decided that ‘one morning, Remirro’s body . . . [should be] found cut in two pieces on the piazza at Cesena” (P24), he is not providing us with a (colorfully phrased equivalent of a) universal statement—that is, with something that could also be expressed as: “The best way of pacifying a province is to place there a cruel despot, and then get rid of him in a very visible and atrocious manner.” He is giving us an example whose relevance to our situation will have to be decided on a case-by-case basis, depending on how we adapt it to the situation, on which parameters of the example we keep and which ones we disregard. So the following is a perfectly coherent stance toward what Machiavelli says: we can find Cesare Borgia’s behavior morally repulsive and still learn something important, and even ethically unobjectionable, from it. For what we learn might have nothing to do with killing or betraying anyone, but rather, say, with adopting a decisive course of action in the face of danger.

These conclusions indicate that exploring the contemporary, or universal, political significance of Machiavelli’s work requires distilling from his examples what lessons are relevant to our, or to most, political circumstances. But they also have, as I said at the beginning, a fundamental suggestion to offer to political

science as such. If the world were not chaotic, or if there were a way of finally bringing its chaos to order, then speaking in generalities, abstracting from individual events and moving to the level of universal truths, might be a promising political strategy. But if the world is indeed chaotic, and its chaos will never come to a rational resolution, then the only feasible course we have left for dealing with it is the modest, contingent, empirical one I have described. We need to get used to as many different situations as we can, in all possible detail, and be active participants in them, so as to train ourselves to handle those concrete details as well as refine our extrapolating ability as such—the very ability that makes it possible to contaminate a situation with another, to apply lessons learned from the former when dealing with the latter. And we need to do a lot of that vicariously, through verbal accounts of situations, because there are only so many situations that we can actually live through; but then our accounts will only help to the extent that they don't too quickly lose concreteness, that they stay close to the ground, that they make us, as much as possible, see and hear and smell and feel what it's like to be there. As Machiavelli, for example, does.

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